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Bush's Iran-Contra Role Still Remains an Enigma As Probe Fails to Bring Elusive Image Into Focus

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"The key players around there (the White House) know that I expressed certain reservations on certain aspects."

—George Bush, Feb. 13, Lansing, Mich.

"I don't speak up in these (White House) meetings. I haven't done it for six and a half years. I'm not going to start now."

—George Bush, March 15, CBS's "60 Minutes."

WASHINGTON—After six months of investigations, Vice President George Bush's role in the Iran-Contra affair remains, in the words of one prober, "an enigma."

Investigators on Capitol Hill and at the independent counsel's office continue to puzzle over Mr. Bush's pathway through the sprawling anatomy of the case. He had private meetings with a key operative in a private supply network to the Contra forces in Nicaragua and with a major planner of the arms deal with Iran.

Mr. Bush was in the group of four top officials who supposedly oversaw the Iran deal on a day-to-day basis from beginning to end. For President Reagan, it exploded into the greatest scandal in his public career. For former Chief of Staff Donald Regan and former National Security Adviser Vice Adm. John Poindexter, it meant forced resignations under heavy fire. But for Mr. Bush—the fourth member of the group—the after-shocks have been, as yet, less pronounced.

Mr. Bush's multiple connections with the Iran-Contra affair probably means that further details of his role will continue to be made public for months. Yesterday, Robert McFarlane, Adm. Poindexter's predecessor as national security adviser, testified on Capitol Hill that he told the vice president about contributions to the Contras from Saudi Arabia. And last week former Maj. Gen. Richard V. Secord testified that Mr. Bush called Lt. Col. Oliver North a few hours after he had been fired from

the White House and praised him for his work. Col. North was the chief White House operative working on the details of the dealings with Iran and the clandestine supply effort for the Contras.

Thus far, Mr. Bush has left two seemingly contradictory images. There is the vice president who is touting his depth of expertise in foreign affairs and intelligence matters in his undeclared, front-running race for the presidency. Then there's the vice president who suggests he really didn't know what was going on and kept silent during many of the meetings he did attend.

Bush Adds to Mystery

Mr. Bush's cryptic references to the matter seem to have imparted more mystery. He is the vice president who was intimate with White House insiders and warned them he had "reservations" about the deal. He is also the vice president who marched stolidly along with the president right down to the bitter end as a kind of innocent, patriotic bystander.

"I wish," he told CBS, "with clairvoyant hindsight that I had known that we were trading arms for hostages."

Lately the vice president has been selling the latter image on the campaign trail. "I have never believed that loyalty is a character flaw. I will not turn my back on the great President Ronald Reagan," he said repeatedly during a recent swing through New Hampshire.

Mr. Bush's current policy is not to talk about the matter in detail until all the investigations are over. Craig Fuller, Mr. Bush's chief of staff, and Donald Gregg, the vice president's top military adviser, have been cooperating with investigators, according to Larry Thomas, Mr. Bush's press secretary.

The chronologies that have been developed thus far on Mr. Bush's activities in the Iran-Contra affair shed no light on what the vice president's reservations might have been or when he formed them. In the first week of January 1986, according to the Senate Intelligence Committee, Mr. Bush, Mr. Regan and Admiral Poindexter counseled the president before he signed the draft version of an "intelligence finding."

The same group attended the president two weeks later when he signed an amended version of the finding, the key le-

gal document that allowed the Iran arms trade to go ahead. "Thereafter," the Tower Commission continued, "the only senior-level review the Iran initiative received was during one or another of the President's daily national security briefings. These were routinely attended only by the President, the Vice President, Mr. Regan and VADM Poindexter."

Mr. Bush has characterized the Tower Commission report as making it "clear I wasn't involved in some of the things that people consider were wrong." One of the major criticisms made by the report, however, states that the preoccupation of the four top-level overseers with the case prevented the policies from getting "a tough, critical review" from experts at lower levels for 11 months.

Ties to Ex-CIA Operatives

Most of the explaining done by Mr. Bush's staff to date has dwelled on a sidelight to the major policy blunders: Mr. Bush's dealings with Felix I. Rodriguez, an arms dealer and soldier of fortune, who is part of an "old boy network" of former CIA operatives that includes Mr. Gregg.

According to a chronology put out by the vice president's office, the friendship between Mr. Rodriguez and Mr. Gregg began in Vietnam in 1970 when they were both involved in a CIA anti-guerrilla effort near Saigon.

In December 1984, Mr. Rodriguez asked Mr. Gregg to help him get a job advising the El Salvador Air Force on anti-guerrilla tactics. The following month Mr. Rodriguez raised the same subject in a meeting with Vice President Bush.

Both Mr. Rodriguez and Mr. Bush's office have issued statements insisting that the subject of aid to the Nicaraguan Contras did not come up during any of three meetings Mr. Rodriguez had with the vice president. Nonetheless, Mr. Rodriguez went to El Salvador in 1985 and promptly became involved in coordinating aid to the Contras.

The latest explanation of this coincidence emerged late last month when a copy of a letter was leaked to the press indicating that it was Col. North, a former White House aide, and not Mr. Gregg, who asked Mr. Rodriguez to become involved with the Contra supply effort.



George Bush

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In August 1986, Mr. Rodriguez came to Washington to complain to Mr. Bush's staff that the Contra resupply effort was faltering from manpower problems and faulty equipment. "The Vice President was not informed of these meetings," according to the chronology issued by Mr. Bush's office.

In his testimony last week, however, Gen. Secord said one of his aides escorted Mr. Rodriguez to the door of the vice president's office and that Gen. Secord was later told that Mr. Rodriguez met with Mr. Bush. The vice president's office asserted that Gen. Secord was "misinformed."

Whatever transpired, by August Mr. Bush was well aware of other foul-ups in the Iran-Contra affair. According to the Tower Commission, he was present in May when Mr. McFarlane returned from Iran to complain that the arms-for-hostages deal should be stopped.

In July the vice president and Mr. Fuller met in Israel with Amiram Nir, Israel's chief operative on the Iran trade, who helped revive the deal. According to Mr. Fuller's notes of the meeting, the vice president "made no commitments nor did he give any direction to Nir."

While the Iran-Contra question may still prove nettlesome to Washington investigators and reporters, Mr. Bush's handlers insist it seldom arises on the campaign trail.

When it does, it seems to amount to lit-

tle more than an occasional annoying moment, such as happened the other day in a chicken hatchery in Walpole, N.H., when a local television crew asked Mr. Bush whether his involvement in the Iran-Contra affair has resulted in a loss of credibility. "I don't feel there's been any erosion," replied the vice president, who promptly returned to shaking the hands of chicken sorters.